

(July 12, 1977)

PROPOSED LINE ON THE GAY LIBERATION MOVEMENT

by

Randy Notte

Introduction

Since the '60's a wave of radical sentiment has brightened prospects for world revolution. Initially in response to the intervention of American imperialist forces in Viet Nam, this sentiment expressed itself particularly among students who were to challenge many of the prevailing norms of capitalist rule. So intense was the feeling against capitalist war that a general antipathy against capitalism itself was born and young people began, for the first time in many years, to lend an ear to revolutionary Marxism.

But the radicalization was not merely limited to the universities. Spilling over to ethnic and national minorities and to women, the radicalization challenged capitalist sovereignty and exposed its degenerate character. The youth rejected capitalist tedium and its stale air, native people demanded an end to racial discrimination, and women sought to establish an equal role in society. To the growing clamour of equal rights a new voice was added, that of the homosexual.

Since 1971, the Gay Liberation movement has embodied the struggle against the anti-sexual system oppressing all people and has sought to enact protection for gay people in law. Today some fifty gay organisations exist across the country, many of whom express different ideas on or for political action. But by far the most prevalent view is that of "civil rights through public action". What this concept means is that before any legal measures protecting gays can be won, gay people in as large numbers as possible must be organised and directed in campaigns that are visible and that can win allies in the public. This perspective is the only one which to date allows for the mobilization of the gay masses---an indispensable condition for liberation. Not only has this perspective given gays the exposure necessary to combat oppression but it has also made it possible for demonstrations of several hundred to occur in both Montreal and Toronto and for smaller ones in Ottawa, Kingston, Vancouver, Winnipeg and Saskatoon. Socialists welcome these developments because they express an element of militancy hostile to the capitalist state and its institutions. The socialist view says that it is this system which is directly responsible for the torment gay people face in the workplace, in accommodation and in all other areas of social and personal life.

The case of John Damien, the Ontario racing official fired for simply being gay, attests to the reality of this oppression. Because the case represents the most concrete instance of anti-gay oppression, socialists see it as the sina qua non and primary task for the Canadian gay movement and one that can build the struggle like never before. The concept of "civil rights through public action" can be made more plausible and can reach broader strata if it is seen in this light. And the struggle which at this moment rages across the U. S. demands

just as much attention. Anita Bryant and her forces are marshalling a religious, neo-fascist crusade against gay people. She and the forces linked to her (the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birch Society being the best examples) must be stopped.

We do not see that this oppression has simply sprung up overnight. Rather, and like everything else, a history has preceded its birth and its affect on the world. The Marxist tradition of gathering empirical data and interpreting them in light of subjective factors (better known as the materialist method) can aid gay people in understanding their oppression and in ultimately destroying it. For this reason, this paper shall examine the historical roots of gay oppression and the past movements which fought against it, the family as the source of this oppression and the view that homosexuality is neither better nor worse as a form of sexual experience.

The Roots of Sexual Oppression: the Judaeo-Christian Tradition

Marxists believe that religion, arising as it does as an ideology of each ruling class during its own historical epoch, is one of the main tools in our time for the maintenance of bourgeois rule. In matters of sexual life, it is the church which through its monopoly on the institution of marriage can maintain its idea of what sexual life can and cannot be. Although certain sectors of the church appear to be liberalising their puritanical viewpoints on sex and homosexuality in particular, the overwhelming majority still hold to standard notions about sin and in regard to homosexuality, the "sin so horrible it should not be mentioned among Christians".

The Church's venomous contempt for any type of sexual behavior outside marriage and for any other purpose than reproduction has been passed down through what is commonly called the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It was Alfred Kinsey who, through his investigation of sexual life some thirty years ago, became one of the first to recognise the deleterious effect religion had in sexual matters. And despite the fact that Kinsey's findings were largely empirical, it was the Church (particularly Roman Catholics) that was to provide the stiffest opposition to his research.¹

The beginnings of this tradition can be traced back to about 700 B.C., when among the ancient Hebrews laws against homosexuality, adultery, nudity and a number of other sexual practises were enacted. Some researchers have felt that following the Babylonian captivity, the Jews, to distinguish themselves from other semitic tribes around them, sought to build and preserve their cultural autonomy upon the various anti-sexual edicts found particularly in the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. John Lauritzen makes mention of this in his pamphlet Religious Roots of the Taboo on Homosexuality: "The Hebrews came to associate homosexual practises with foreign customs. They referred to the 'way of the Canaanite' or the 'way of the heathen' rather than name practises which in

time became unnameable. To them, the Sodom and Gomorrah story vividly illustrated the wrath of Yahweh against an alien people for their alien practices".²

While this is undoubtedly a factor, it must be remembered that the god Yahweh epitomized the developing patriarchy: jealous, vengeful, male, and supreme in matters of morality. His male representative on earth was called upon to "increase and multiply". Hence, no time could be spent in the pursuit of homosexual activity---activity jeopardizing not only the consolidating patriarchy but the family upon which it rested. Engels stated in the Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State³ that the sexuality of women was suppressed precisely to establish the identity of the man's heirs. Without such identity primitive inheritance from father to son could not be effected. Homosexuality came to be seen as foreign to inheritance rights and as an activity which could jeopardize it. Bob McCubbin in his recently published pamphlet says: "Sexual restrictions on men have, of course, never been as severe as those on women. But, having just won the right to bequeath his name and wealth to his son---to have his name and honor live after him---the father could not have been pleased at the prospect of a homosexual son who might never produce heirs of his own. In fact, there is little doubt that it was just such a fear that constituted the basis of the development of a prohibition against male homosexuality."⁴

Under the more primitive matriarchies*, of course, things were quite different. Our knowledge of these societies in pre-history is by and large extrapolated from more modern tribal groupings. But social scientists from Havelock Ellis⁵ to Ford and Beach⁶ have found that in many instances homosexuality was an integral component of tribal sexual life. Inevitably, the freedom in sexual life is gutted by advances in technology and agriculture; the patriarchy that traditionally arises upon the remains of the matriarchy does away with such cultural features. To avoid a regression to the past, the new society is always compelled to stamp out the vestiges of the old.

If this was true of Hebrew society, then the Christians merely advanced and expanded their ideas. St. Paul, through his various epistles simply elaborated the anathemas of Leviticus. To him, homosexuality was unnatural (as was long hair on men) and he exhorted his flock to guard against the "ungodliness" of the unbeliever: "Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful... God

*I.E.: primitive societies where women share in the means of production on an equal basis with men and wherein descent or lineage is reckoned through them.

gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust toward one another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving that recompence of their error which was meet." (Romans 1: 21, 26-27) Perhaps an unintentional compliment was paid by Paul in equating homosexuals with atheists. Certainly the idea was to be amplified in later years when homosexuality was equated with heresy.

In the years following Paul, Christ's exhortation to "render unto Caesar that which is due unto Caesar and render unto God that which is due unto God" and the eclectic philosophy propagated in his name proved well-suited for the developing Roman state. Because the downtrodden masses of slaves and craftsmen were urged to follow the ways of servitude, humility, and abstention from all things earthly, the stranglehold of the aristocracy could be easily maintained.

Added to Paul's equation of homosexuality with "ungodliness" was the idea that gay people were a risk to the security of the state.* Various Christian emperors invoked edicts against homosexual behavior, but it was not until Justinian that the pattern for subsequent anti-gay laws was firmly set. Havelock Ellis expands on this point when he says: "In the year 538, Justinian, professing terror of certain famines, earthquakes, and pestilences in which he saw 'the mysterious recompence which was meet' by St. Paul, issued his edict condemning unnatural offenders to the sword, 'lest as the result of these impious acts' (as the preamble to his Novella 77 has it) 'whole cities should perish, together with their inhabitants; for we are taught by Holy Scripture that through these acts whole cities perished with the men in them.' This edict (which Justinian followed up by a fresh ordinance to the same effect) constituted the foundation of legal enactment and social opinion concerning the matter in Europe for thirteen hundred years."

Various zealots, among them St. Louis, Charlemagne, and the Popes, were, of course, to mete out Justinian's punishment by fire. At times, it was necessary to shore-up enforcement of his edicts and thus the Church in the Councils of Paris (1212) and Rouen (1214) reasserted the death penalty for sodomy.

Yet still another idea was that which equated homosexuality with heresy. The origins of the word 'bugger' for example, comes from the French 'bougre' or Bulgar. The 'bougres' represented an 11th century heresy originating in Bulgaria. As well, the word

*More recently, the Anita Bryant forces have, in like style, blamed gay people for a snowy winter in Florida.

'faggot' is synonymous with the bundles of sticks used to burn to death both heretics and homosexuals. Theoretical justification was to be found in relevant passages from St. Paul.

Undoubtedly, the rationale behind the Judaeo-Christian tradition and in its long-standing enforcement was that sex was for procreative purposes only. Any other form of sexual activity could not add to the needed labour forces under both feudalism and capitalism, and was therefore to be condemned by them. Naturally, recognized sexual activity was embodied in the family.

The Family and Gay Oppression

Long before the birth of capitalism, when primitive matriarchal societies were the dominant form of social organisation, lineage or descent was reckoned not through the father but through the mother. This because sexual relations between people were of a promiscuous---or to put it more precisely, a polymorphous---character. Children could only recognize their mothers because the mothers themselves could in no way tell who their husbands were or might have been. Relations among the sexes appear, judging from the evidence on these societies, to have been almost as common as relations between the sexes and hence homosexuality was undifferentiated as a factor in sexual response.

Naturally, the important factor of lineage gave women a position which they do not enjoy today. Women were looked upon as the priestesses and leaders of society and the gatherers of the all important harvest.⁷

This theme bears repeating because our society has turned this ancient relationship on its head. Now, it is the father who wins sustenance; it is the father who is priest and leader. With the development and accumulation of surplus, this concept---and category--- has in fact been narrowed down to a small group of ruling capitalists. But the idea of men on top, women below, and children at the bottom is one still very much with us.

Thus the family as we know it under capitalism---the nuclear family--- is, in effect, a microcosm of the society at large. Just as in the workplace the boss 'manages' the workers, the father too 'manages' and directs wife and children in the home. To take the analogy further: capitalism produces commodities for consumption; the individual man produces offspring to replace him in the labour force. But cheap labour in the form of the male worker, reserve labour in the form of women and the fact that children must become through sexual and ideological training replacements for their dismally placed elders attest to the working class as a whole being the underdog of the more powerful and ruling capitalist class.

Yet the question here is how? How, we must ask does the family relationship stay together? One very important, though

certainly not the sole factor in this, is that of sexual roles and education.

From an early age, children are modelled on their parents' image: father strong, mother weak, etc. They are cautioned on the 'sins' of masturbation, homosexuality, and heterosexual relations outside the confines of Holy Matrimony. To be just like mommy and daddy you really must be just as moral, and more importantly, just as heterosexual as mommy and daddy. For without this very important restriction on human sexual affairs, the whole importance of 'mommies' and 'daddies' simply falls away. Without a rigid enforcement of a heterosexual norm, a sine qua non for the family's very being could not and cannot exist. Thus the whole tradition of Judaeo-Christian morality and capitalist ethics is anchored in the concept that only heterosexual relationships---carefully controlled and made incumbent upon all---retain any validity at all.

Now the gay liberation movement, by asserting 'Gay is Good' or 'Gay is Just as Good as Straight' confronts this whole notion with a challenge that says enforced heterosexuality need not be the sole, legitimate sexual orientation. Its whole history has demonstrated that sexual relationships between individuals need not be channelled in any direction outside of personal choice. It has been a movement, which like the womens' movement, demands control of our bodies. In this context, the gay liberation movement can be perceived as having a dynamic of revolutionary proportions.

The Slogan "Gay is Good"

Alfred Kinsey, the American sexologist, found that 10% of adult American males and 6% of adult American females are exclusively homosexual throughout a significant period of their lives.⁸ If these figures are as true of Canadian society, then some two million homosexual women and men exist in this country. Kinsey's findings are startling. Not only did he find that homosexual tendencies and practises occur in every social strata and class, but that homosexuality was disproportionately more frequent amongst the working class. And anthropological data has shown that homosexuality in western society is less accepted than in 44 of 76 societies for which evidence is available. Social scientists Ford and Beach in their book Patterns of Sexual Behavior found that in some societies homosexual activities were expected rather than simply condoned.

Thus the findings of science leads us to the conclusion that sexuality is of a broader and more universal character than religious or moral characterizations of the subject might have us believe. Sexuality, in the view of leading scientists has the character of a continuum with the points on that continuum forming a component whole. To judge homosexuality in any other terms than

as a natural and commonplace component of human sexuality is to judge it in moral terms.

When in 1969, the youth radicalization gave birth to the gay liberation movement, many gay militants began to discover this wealth of scientific data. Their counterparts in the black and women's movements made similar discoveries. They found that race or sex could not be held as a credible basis for inferiority. To express this empirical data in political terms and to manifest their awakened pride, they put forward the slogans "Black is Beautiful" and "Sisterhood is Powerful". These slogans also expressed an attack on prevailing bourgeois norms. Similarly, the gay movement advanced the slogan "Gay is Good". The slogan has never been aimed at proselytization nor to infer that homosexuality is in any way superior to other forms of sexual behavior. It is simply an affirmation, put in subjective form (as all slogans are), of the objective facts. This is why the left should solidarize with this slogan.

A recently published pamphlet from the League for Socialist Action finds it impossible to fully understand this concept. "Gay Liberation in Canada: A Socialist Perspective" as it is called, is really a mish-mash of dissenting views culled from internal discussions within the LSA.⁹ But John Riddell, speaking on behalf of the League's leadership, says in this document that "the party" cannot take a position on "scientific" questions. He says: "How does it hurt us to take positions on scientific questions? First, except for a small handful of specialists in the field, members of the League have no access to the facts on which a position is based. They cannot form an independent opinion. The best they can do is give a vote of confidence to this or that scientific specialist." One could easily ask Riddell if he truly believes scientific knowledge is locked away from the rest of the world. If not, then perhaps Riddell is saying that his "party" is too stupid to rationally discern what is established fact and what is fancy. Yet Riddell goes on to say, "Second, our positions are not going to be tested in experience, so there's no way of resolving differences and correcting errors. So it tends to break a political party into rival cliques." One wonders here what would have happened if Comrade Riddell had have met Lenin while he was working on Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. No doubt Riddell would have cautioned Lenin not to write it for fear its scientific postulations would have broken his party into cliques. No doubt Lenin would have thrown Riddell out the window. Yet Riddell goes on, "Third, taking positions like this does not promote our goal--- building a revolutionary party. It depoliticizes us, it makes us less able to grow into a mass party, and it tends to transform us into an esoteric cult." Besides not saying how combining science with socialism leads to atrophy and depoliticization, Riddell, in this amazing soliloquy, tramples on the notion "Gay is Good" for fear of taking positions scientific socialism behooves him to take. Perhaps in Riddell's view the great wealth

of data in all fields of scientific endeavor cannot serve the interests of the workers. Yet if this is the case, the only rational decision Marxists can make is to debunk the entire catalogue of Marxist literature---not one item of which is not scientific in basis.

The Significance of the Stalinist-Social Democratic Tradition

Naturally, any left analysis of gay oppression must ask the question: why has the left been so slow to recognize this whole matter in the first place? And just as important: what did Marxists in the past have to say about it? Now it is not our intention here to go into a complete history of the early gay movement. John Lauritzen and David Thorstad in The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)¹⁰ and Jim Steakley in The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany¹¹ have done that well enough and readers are directed to them for a deeper analysis of this important topic. But it is necessary to dwell on a few of the relevant points as they deal with the Marxist movement.

The first recorded instance in which a Marxist was faced with this question was in 1862. In that year, a socialist by the name of Jean Baptiste von Schweitzer was convicted on a morals charge arising from a homosexual incident. Barred from law practise, von Schweitzer faced the derision of his comrades in the worker's movement. It was up to the great socialist and working class leader Ferdinand Lasalle, to tackle this derision: "Such a reaction toward a man of your character and intelligence proves only how confused and philistine the political concepts of our people are...."

Later, when controversy over the trial and ultimate conviction of Oscar Wilde had flared up, a rare voice in his defense was that of Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein was a prominent member of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and a contributor to its paper Die Neue Zeit. In his defense of Wilde, Bernstein presented an analysis from a materialist perspective. He emphasized that "moral attitudes are historical phenomena" and thus judgments as to what sexual practises are "natural" or not are really untenable.

When in 1905, the early German gay movement presented its petition to the Reichstag (parliament) calling for the repeal of anti-gay sections of the penal code, the sole voices in its favour were those of August Bebel and Adolph Thiele, both Social Democrats. Speaking before his fellow parliamentarians, Thiele said that Germany's treatment of gays "reminds one of the period of the Middle Ages, of that time when witches were burned, heretics were tortured, and proceedings against dissenters were conducted with the

wheel and gallows."

Following the 1917 war however, and with the rise of the Nazis, a growing economic crises and breakdown of Capitalism and the internal decay of the SPD itself, the Social Democrats performed a startling about face. Falling into the error of queer-baiting the Nazis as vociferously as the Nazis were queer-baiting them, they utilized all kinds of ideas linking homosexuality with bourgeois decadence (vestiges of which go further back in the century when the Social Democratic press exposed one of the Krupps and a flative of the Kaiser as homosexual) and hurling anti-gay epithets particularly against Ernst Röhm, a prominent homosexual Nazi.

And in the '30's Communist Parties especially in Europe were to make as stunning a reversal. Since the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Bolshevik view was that any sexual practise not involving coercion was a matter for personal choice and that the sweeping sexual reforms introduced were an integral part of revolutionary advances. In Germany, bolsheviks like Felix Halle and Richard Linser were prominent in the gay movement there. But with the rise of a privileged, bureaucratic clique within the Soviet Union, virtually all of the reforms instituted by the revolution were wiped away. Not only was homosexuality illegalized but abortion and divorce became harder to obtain. A rank prudery infiltrated all levels of soviet culture as did a deep-going political demoralization among the broad masses of workers. Stalin, who personified the bureaucracy, personally intervened to promote the illegalization of homosexuality in 1934. But much more contemptuous was the stalinist idea that same-sex love represented a "fascist perversion". The stalinists also utilized the "decadence" line first put forward by the Social Democrats.

For many years it was not the vanguard concepts of Bebel, Thiele and Bernstein which codified the left's view to homosexuality and gay rights but the "degeneracy; fascist perversion" myths put out by the Social Democrats and Stalinists. The unhappy emergence of McCarthyism simply compounded the problem: leftists were denounced as "commie faggots" and a conscious effort was introduced to make it look as though socialist organisations were overrun with perverts. It could only be expected that the left took some unfortunate positions notably either the expulsion or exclusion from membership of gay people. What is less defensible is that many groups on the left continue to advance little or no perspective on this question---despite the emergence of a militant, international Gay Liberation movement. Clearly what is needed is a break from the these Social-Democratic perspectives and a commitment to grow with and learn from the contemporary gay struggle.

A Note in Conclusion

This paper does not pretend any elaborate, independent

analysis of the gay question. Our aim is much humbler. We merely wish as a tiny socialist current, to solidarize ourselves with the contemporary gay movement and to underline a few of the main features of gay oppression as well as to give some background as to why the left has traditionally stayed away from doing so before. In this sense, we offer this work to the gay movement as a skeletal but necessary first step.

A Note to the Comrades: Some Internal Questions

As outlined in the branch discussion of some weeks ago, I was directed to write an analysis of what I thought the SL's position to Gay Liberation should be. Here it is. Uppermost in my mind was that should such an analysis be adopted, we should move to have it made public, perhaps in the form of a small pamphlet. Indeed the whole paper was tailored to such a concept for two reasons: 1) to immediately solidarize our periphery in the gay movement and 2) to publicly debate rival elements, particularly the LSA/RMG. I think these are key to recruitment from the gay movement.

Comrades will no doubt first wish to make their disagreements with this document known, preferably in written form. If this is the case, then a reasonable length of time must be allowed for a full, internal debate.

Now an idea is current within the League that such a debate be made public and that Forward be utilized for this purpose. A proposition like this is wrong. First, to make a debate public before all comrades have had a chance to discuss the issues internally simply flouts elementary bolshevik democracy. Second, it allows for no resolve of differences and simply creates an atmosphere inconducive for the growth of Marxism and the building of the SL. Usually, when Marxists debate one another publically, they are in rival tendencies or are fighting for factional control of the same tendency. I don't think it would be wise for us to cultivate such an image.

Finally, all sections in this document with the exclusion of this last one are submitted for adoption.

-July 12, 1977.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1) Pomeroy, W. B. Dr. Kinsey and the Institute for Sex Research. New York. Harper & Row, 1972.
- 2) Lauritsen, John. Religious Roots on the Taboo on Homosexuality. New York. Self-published, 1974.
- 3) Engels, Frederick. The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. New York. International Publishers, 1972.
- 4) McCubbin, Bob. The Gay Question: A Marxist Appraisal. New York. World View Publishers, 1976.
- 5) Ellis, Havelock. Studies in the Psychology of Sex. New York. Random House, 1942.
- 6) Ford, C. S. and Beach, F. A. Patterns of Sexual Behavior. New York. Harper & Row, 1951.
- 7) Briffault, Robert. The Mothers. New York. Atheneum, 1977.
- 8) McCaffrey, Joseph A., ed. The Homosexual Dialectic. Englewood Cliffs, N. J. Prentice-Hall, 1972.
- 9) Riddell, John, et al. Gay Liberation in Canada: A Socialist Perspective. Toronto. Vanguard Publications, 1977.
- 10) Lauritsen, John and Thorstad, David. The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935). New York. Times Change Press, 1974.
- 11) Steakley, James D. The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany. New York. Arno Press, 1975.